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TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR BU
SUBJECT: DEFENSE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN UPBEAT ON MILITARY
COOPERATION

Classified By: DCM Alex Karagiannis for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Angel Naydenov, Parliamentary Defense Committee Chairman and leader of the Socialist Parliamentary Group, was positive on U.S.-Bulgaria military cooperation and supportive of plans to increase the public profile of our steadily expanding relationship. Naydenov plans to attend the October 15 Distinguished Visitor and Media Day at the joint military facilities in Novo Selo and expressed support for making a clearer case to the Bulgarian public on the value to Bulgaria of the joint facilities and joint training.

He was also supportive of staging public events to acknowledge the delivery of 52 U.S. HMMWVs granted to Bulgaria under the Coalition Solidarity Fund and to welcome home the final Bulgarian contingent in Iraq. Although Naydenov would not commit to backing particular defense procurements, such as U.S. fighters vs. French Corvette ships, he recognized the dire situation of the Bulgarian Air Force and supported efforts to modernize it. He would fight to keep Bulgaria's defense budget above the NATO recommended level of two per cent of GDP.

¶2. (C) The leadership of the ruling Socialist Party has been decidedly pro-NATO and pro-U.S., doing all we have asked in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo, often putting themselves far out ahead of their political base. In deference to their supporters on the left, top Socialist Party officials have in the past shied away from actively promoting the security relationship. It is noteworthy that despite a general election looming next year, the government is showcasing its strong U.S. ties. End Summary.

¶3. (C) Participation by the President, Defense Minister and parliamentary leadership at the Distinguished Visitor and Media Day on Oct 15 will place U.S.-Bulgarian military cooperation in the media spotlight. In a October 3 meeting with MP Naydenov, the DCM stressed the importance of showcasing the benefits of our strategic partnership to the Bulgarian public. Naydenov agreed, saying he wanted to generate favorable coverage that highlights U.S. help for Bulgarian military modernization, particularly joint training, FMF and IMET assistance. The DCM mentioned the arrival in late October of 52 U.S. HMMWVs, (20 up-armored) granted to the Bulgarians through the Coalition Solidarity Fund. Naydenov agreed that a public event to recognize the handover of the vehicles would be valuable, and also supported a welcome home event at the end of December for the final Bulgarian contingent returning from Iraq. He emphasized how much Bulgaria appreciated U.S. financial assistance (through NADR funds) for clean up of the ammunition explosion at Chelopechene Storage Facility outside of Sofia; any additional support, he said, would be greatly appreciated.

¶4. (C) Aware of ongoing negotiations with the U.S. Air Force on acquisition of F-16s for the Bulgarian Air Force, Naydenov said he recognized the urgent need for modernization of the Bulgarian Air Force, but he stopped short of supporting any specific procurement, noting that the Defense Committee would leave these determinations to the Defense Ministry. He stressed the need to balance scarce resources across the military services and expressed hope that any deal reached on U.S. fighters could be structured financially to allow payment over a long time period, reducing the immediate budgetary impact. Naydenov noted that budget deliberations were just beginning and that pressure to increase spending on social programs in advance of the elections would be intense, but he anticipated Bulgaria meeting the NATO recommended level of two per cent of GDP for defense spending, an important benchmark for Bulgaria's Armed Forces in the midst their transformation and modernization program.

¶5. (C) Comment: Naydenov is an influential member of the ruling Socialist Party's inner circle with a reputation as a moderate. Generally pro-NATO and pro-U.S., his support for U.S.-Bulgaria security cooperation is not a surprise, but his enthusiasm for publicly showcasing the defense relationship and taking the case to the public is new. Even with general elections approaching next year, the ruling Socialist Party (BSP) is not downplaying ties to the U.S. but is showcasing the benefits of U.S. partnership, though its core voters are quite skeptical of U.S.-Bulgaria military cooperation. This calculated BSP decision, despite an election cycle is a positive signal the current government will forge ahead with our bilateral security agenda.

McEldowney